

USING ARTICLES (A, AN, THE)

What are articles?

Articles are three tricky words: ‘**the**’ (called the **definite article**), ‘**a**’ and ‘**an**’ (together referred to as **indefinite articles**).

If you are unsure when to use these words and when to avoid them, you are not alone.

Do I need to use an article? Which one?

First, it helps to know the difference between countable and uncountable nouns.

Countable nouns can be counted and have a plural form, e.g. *two skis, three wins*.

Uncountable nouns cannot be counted and don’t have a plural form, e.g. *water, information, research*.

The indefinite article



We use the **indefinite article** with non-unique, singular countable nouns, e.g. *there is **a** tutorial each week; she found **an** antidote to that poison*.

‘A’ and ‘an’ are used in various situations:

Instance	Example
Jobs	She is an actor
Beliefs	My friend is a Muslim
Numbers	A dozen people attended
Prices	It is \$5 a kilo
Speeds	45km an hour
Nationalities	He is an Australian citizen

The definite article

We can use the definite article with:

- Singular countable nouns, e.g. ***The** lecturer is late.*
- Plural nouns, e.g. ***The** mice are alive*
- Uncountable nouns, e.g. ***The** information is very dated.*

We also use the definite article when something is unique, e.g. ***The** sun is shining; **The** earth is beautiful.*

We also use ‘**the**’ in the following instances:

- Some geographic names, e.g. ***The** Bahamas, **The** Arctic Sea, **The** Pilbara.*
- Spoken dates, e.g. ***The** first of May.*
- Superlatives, e.g. ***The** best meal I’ve had; **The** tallest building in the world.*

Known and unknown nouns

We use:

- ‘**a/an**’ when the topic is unknown to the reader or listener; and
- ‘**the**’ when the topic is known, e.g. ***The Australian Research Council** funded a project investigating the effects of climate change in 2018.*

Sometimes the context or a phrase makes a situation/person known, e.g.

- *Meet me at **the** café **near the** Science Library.*
- *Is the guest lecturer here? Yes, she is in **the** seminar room already.*

A common use in academic writing

The + noun + of, e.g. ***the** development of Australia’s educational system; **the** effects of market liberalisation.*

No articles

We do not need to use articles for generalisations in the following cases:

- General ideas, e.g. **Religion** is an *important consideration*.
- Countable, plural nouns, e.g. **Seminars** are instructive [*the example, 'The seminars are instructive', would refer to a specific set of seminars*].
- Uncountable nouns, e.g. **Information** from the internet is frequently inaccurate [*Adding an article before the word 'Information' would be incorrect*].

Similarly, **no articles** are used for:

- Mealtimes, e.g. *Have you had **lunch**?*
- Sports, e.g. *She plays **rugby** and **golf**.*
- Most places and geographic features, e.g. **Perth, Spain, Asia, Mount Doom**.
- Most illnesses, e.g. *She has **whooping cough**, and he has **leukaemia**.*
- Some idioms, e.g. *To be on **time**; to learn by **heart**.*

TIP

Sometimes articles are **unpredictable** and there is **no clear rule** about their use.

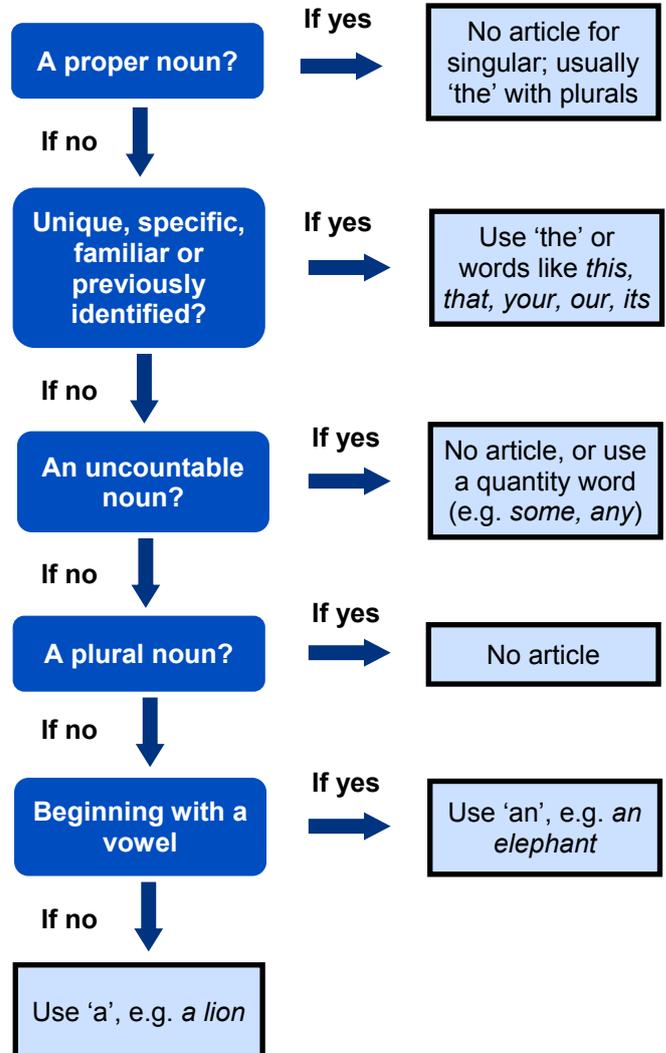
We go to **the** post office, but we go to **school** and **go home**.

We wake in **the** morning and study in **the** afternoon but sleep at **night**.

Choosing an article (flowchart)

You can use the flowchart below to decide when you should use articles and what articles you should use.

Is the noun...



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